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THE WASHINGTON POST
26 May 1981

# House Assassinations Attacked for Secrecy

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When the House Assassinations Committee issued its final report two years ago, it proclaimed its dedication to public disclosure of the facts surrounding the murders of President John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the investigations of those murders.

"It is essential," the now-defunct committee said, "not only that persons be able to judge the performance of the executive agencies, but that they be able to judge this committee's performance as well. Such is the very essence of representative democracy."

The report was released in July 1979. By then, the moribund committee's chairman and its chief counsel had already quietly arranged to lock up — for a period of 50 years — all the backup records and transcripts that it didn't publish. The chairman, Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), also asked the Justice Department, the CIA and other executive branch agencies to treat the records they compiled for the investigation in the same fashion, as "congressional material" not to be released to the public.

Some agencies, such as the Federal Aviation Administration, didn't even get their records back. Others, such as the Army, sealed the files they put together — including, apparently, documents that had been sought under the Freedom of Information Act before the House committee was even created.

The extent of the extraordinary secrecy is just now coming to light, as the result of inquiries by assassination critics seeking to pursue their own research and to assess the House committee's performance. They suspect a deliberate effort to avoid the kind of scrutiny that eventually tarnished the work of the Warren Commission in probing the 1963 Kennedy slaying.

In fact, the Warren Commission is now an open book in comparison to the House Assassinations Committee.

"What Stokes has done is arrange it so that the mechanism by which people can correct the errors of government don't apply to Congress," protests Harold Weisberg, author of several books on both the Kennedy and King assassinations. "He's arranged for his own private coverup."

"There's even less disclosure than I thought was possible," Mark Allen, a Kennedy assassination researcher, said after obtaining a copy of one of the letters Stokes wrote.

"A great deal of material has been generated by your department in response to specific requests or concerns of the Select Committee," Stokes said in the letter, dated March 27, 1979, and addressed to Griffin B. Bell, then attorney general. "In addition, your department is in physical custody of a variety of materials originating from the Select Committee. It can be anticipated that your department will receive requests under the Freedom of Information Act for access to these materials.

"The purpose of this letter is to request specifically that this congressional material and related information in a form connected to the committee not be disclosed outside your department without the written concurrence of the House of Representatives."

"Now that I see this letter," Allen said, "it makes me wonder whether these people sat around and said, 'We don't want our work subject to the intensive scrutiny that the Warren Commission's was. Let's not subject ourselves to embarrassment.' I think that's what they're up to."

Stokes and his former chief counsel, G. Robert Blakey, brush aside such talk and insist they did the best they could after the committee went out of business in January 1979 with a last-minute finding of probable conspiracy in the Kennedy case — and a final report still to be written. Blakey and a is follow the advice of counsel for the House."

Blakey, now a professor at the Notre Dame law school, took a similar position.

"If you lay on me the charge that we kept too much secret, it's a bum rap," he declared. As for the merits of the House investigation, Blakey, who is now about 45, added:

"I'll rest on the historians' judgment 50 years from now when everything becomes available. I'll rest on the historical judgment that is made on us in 50 years."

Blakey acknowledged that the committee had intended to sift through all its records as well as those furnished by executive agencies and publish more, but he said the committee ran out of time and money.

"The best of intentions runs up into the reality of limited time and resources," he said. "There were all kinds of classified information in those [unpublished] documents."

And what of the objections of Weisberg and other critics that there was now no way of adequately assessing the committee's performance?

"He [Weisberg] can kiss my a--," responded the professor from Notre Dame. "And you can quote me on that."

When the Warren Commission completed its work in 1964 with the publication of a final report and 26 companion volumes, its backup records, consisting of some 300 cubic feet of material, were transferred to the National Archives, where officials planned to keep them under seal for 75 years. That was then general policy for the records of investigatory agencies. But a public outcry prompted the White House to order an about-face. Periodic reviews and releases of the documents were decreed with the aim of "fullest possible disclosure."